no man is an island

by narcomanic

Summary

Running away from the hive mind is easier said than done, especially when you've been so clever all your life that you never had to learn how to ask for help.

Notes

It occurs to me on rereading that this story is roughly 50% plot and 50% me shoehorning as much of my headcanon of these two into said plot as possible. I oscillated between 'man, this is a really heavy-handed metaphor' and 'man, this metaphor is so vague nobody's gonna get it' while writing, so if there are some bits that are kinda confusing feel free to ask in the comments - I probably had some kind of reasoning behind it that I forgot to elaborate on.

(Also, the title may not have as much to do with the story as it does with the fact that I'll never miss an opportunity to quote John Donne.)

It takes nearly a month before the PPDC is ready to let him go, and by that time Newt has been overrun with job offers. Even canceling the apocalypse isn't enough to allow him to evade paperwork, though, so there is a good deal of bureaucratic arguing over what is to be done with the remaining kaiju specimen. Newt would gladly exchange any medal they want to pin on him for a Cat 3 tissue sample or a preserved skin mite, but as long as the specimen are officially authorized to the PPDC and no single scientist, there isn't much he can do.
In any case, the MIT is more than happy to welcome him back to its halls after a decade away. His is a household name now, a real feather in their cap – imagine, one of their own boys saving the world (take that, Harvard) and returning to tell the story. Newt stands in front of a jam-packed lecture hall, nearly an auditorium in size, talking to a crowd of raptured faces hanging onto his every word and by God, this is what it's like to be a rockstar. Initially, he was asked about doing a joint tenure with his colleague, it would be the chance of a lifetime, you see, to have the two most sought-after minds under the same roof – But Hermann was back in Berlin, the last Newt heard of him, and he tries his best not to think about that lest he be tempted to pick up the phone, jump on a plane in the hopes that maybe –

(He tries not to think of Hermann, because it makes his leg ache for no good reason, and Newt has to sit down in the middle of his lecture, which he then spends rolling around the room in his swivel chair but he can do whatever he wants now, and really it's not that much different from the way he was before.)

It is good while it lasts, so insanely good, that he misses when exactly the eager faces of the audience started looking more like spectators at a zoo rather than his students and colleagues (have you seen his back? I heard they cover his entire body). It is the kind of gleeful attention that reminds him that Cambridge never suffered a direct hit; none of the people he speaks to have actually felt the visceral horror of an attack or watched the immeasurable bulk of a kaiju push landward, yet they speak of it with an authority reserved for people who've only ever experienced a disaster from a distance. (It's no secret that kaiju cults flourished particularly in inland regions.)

He ignores the whispers as long as he knows they don't intend him to hear. The stares are harder to bear, though, and all the more often Newt finds himself staring back at the cashier, the undergrad, the deliveryman who thinks they're subtler than they are, and he thinks, God, he thinks, if that's really what they think of him then maybe the next time the apocalypse comes knocking, he won't be that concerned about preserving the human race, if they think they're somehow better than him for a splash of ink then maybe they deserve to –

He locks up those thoughts before they can get any further, and anyway they only ever give him a headache.

There is a stabbing pain behind his left eye that radiates through his entire head. Something sharp's digging into the sole of his foot, and his arms are covered in scratches he doesn't remember getting.

Slowly, Newt's apartment, or what remains of it, comes into focus. The pain in his foot appears to be caused by a splinter from when he, at some point, upended his living room table. A bookcase lies on the ground, the frame intact where its contents no longer are, and there is a frankly alarming amount of broken glass strewn across the floor along with any number of debris.

His throat feels dry and sore, like he has been screaming for a long time. He might have been, as there's someone pounding at his door, and Newt feels like his body moves before he has the time to give it an order to do so, and he yanks the door open. The movement is so sudden that the man on the other side, who turns out to be his neighbor Nathan, actually jumps back a bit. Newt knows he's a good head shorter than Nathan, who's a solidly built man in his twenties, but from where
he's standing the man looks small and fragile like a child, all flimsy skin and warm, soft organs.

“God,” Nathan breathes out. “Jesus, Geiszler, you look like shit.”

Newt cracks his jaw and doing so becomes aware that there's something wet and warm oozing down the lower part of his face. The attempt of a smile he offers doesn't seem to calm Nathan at all.

“m okay,” Newt finally croaks. He takes a step back, retreating beyond lurching distance of Nathan, who tries to speak up before Newt can disappear back into his apartment.

“Do you need any–”

“Go away,” Newt growls with a voice he isn't entirely sure is his own and closes the door, leans against it. God, his head hurts.

He stumbles across the apartment to the bathroom, avoiding the worst of the rubble, and manages to turn on the lights after a few tries. There's blood crusted on his upper lip from the copious nosebleed, a thin film of it coating his teeth. His left eye is shot through with veins to the point that the white appears almost pink. He cleans his face and rinses his mouth until the last of the clotted blood has been washed out. When Newt has ascertained that his left pupil still responds to light and he doesn't have any head wounds, he goes to check the state of the living room.

He gathers what there is left to be salvaged in a sort of daze, and carefully clears out the broken glass. The bookshelf takes a bit of wrestling, after which he picks up and puts what items he can find into a semblance of order. There's a calmness to his movements, as if he's running on autopilot.

It's approaching midnight when he's finished. The TV is a lost cause, as is the table, but the couch has remained intact enough for Newt to curl up on it and have a bit of a panic.

He has no memory of trashing his apartment. In fact, the last couple of hours are a blur. He would've assumed a break-in if his door hadn't been locked from the inside (if he hadn't seen the bloody ring around his left iris like so many months ago). This isn't mania, this is... well, he doesn't know exactly, nobody knows because he is the only person reckless enough to actually –

Just the thought of Hermann sends an aftershock of pain through Newt's head but his terror is overriding rationality and so he stands up on wobbly legs in search of his phone. Its screen, when he finds it, has cracked pretty impressively but it still works. The issue of time zones only enters his mind a second before he lifts the phone to his ear, which is mainly why he doesn't particularly notice that the call tone barely rings once before Hermann picks up.

“Well?”

“Hey, listen...” Newt trails off, the silence on the line stretching as his mind races blank. “Look, I think I had an... Well, I don't know, a-a thing, a fit? I don't remember what or how, I just know my head hurt like fuck when I came to, and the room was all, all...”

“Newton.”

“Like, shit all over the place and my eye feels like it's about to burst–”

“Newton, listen to me. What do you remember?”

“I-I don't know, man. I got home, put my stuff down, got stuff out for work. Felt pissed because of people but that's me all the time these days...”
“Did you hurt yourself? Anyone else?”

“No!” The exclamation stings his throat and he breaks out in a coughing fit. “Shit, wait...” Hermann's voice is tinny and distant from the earpiece while Newt gets a glass of water.

“–sound all right.”

“I'm fine, throat's just shot,” he says once his voice is cooperating again.

“Has this happened before?”

Newt leans his forehead on his free hand. “No... I don't think so?” He swallows. “I mean, I can't remember what – so I'm not sure. How... I don't know, this isn't me, this isn't what usually happens–!”

“All right, calm down. Calm down, Newton,” Hermann intones when Newt's breathing keeps quickening. Newt can feel his hands starting to shake.

“I don't fucking know what to do,” he finally squeezes out, his voice barely more than a whisper.

There is a pause from Hermann's end of the line. Silent except for his steady breathing and a faint rustle that makes Newt realize he'd probably woken him up.

His headache is steadily getting better by the time Hermann speaks again.

“I think we should meet.”

Two days later, after eight hours in the confines of a plane and the jet lag to match, the Tegel Airport is a cacophony of noise and human activity that would put Newt on edge even on his best days.

He finds Hermann waiting for him in the arrivals lounge, looking barely any more comfortable than Newt himself on the hard chairs. They've no more than exchanged perfunctory greetings when Hermann's face slots back into its ever-present frown.

“Did you have another... episode?” he asks as quietly as he can in the din of the hall. Newt instinctively raises a hand to his left eye and just as quickly drops it. He shakes his head.

“Nah, it's been stuck like that,” he replies and attempts a toothy smile. It doesn't come out too well judging by Hermann's reaction. Newt shrugs. “At least I had no trouble getting sick leave. They probably thought I have like... eye cancer, or something.”

Hermann merely raises an eyebrow at that and gets up with a muttered 'really' under his breath. “Come on, then,” he says as they head for the exit.

Newt follows the click-clack of Hermann's cane, pulling his suitcase behind him, and breaks into a comfortable babble: “Hey, you think we can get something to eat, I'm starving...”
After stuffing himself full of currywurst, Newt crashes on the couch in Hermann's living room turned second office, as there is no spare bed (Why would I possibly need one, Hermann asks without too much spite). Newt half-expects Hermann to pull out the hazmat tape and cut him a corner of the room, but apart from a well-worn warning to stay away from the chalkboard or so help me God there are no barbs thrown on either side.

It's only late afternoon by local clock, but Newt's been up and running for over 24 hours with no real rest and there is a soothing quality to the faint smell of chalk and paper in the room. He drifts off, staring absentely at Hermann's calculations, and dreams not of monsters and teeth but walls and walls of numbers, solidly protecting him from all the evils in the world.

The sky's gone dark when he next wakes up. Newt spends a dream-fuzzy moment listening for any movement in the apartment and then quietly gets up. He doesn't dare turn the lights on for fear of waking Hermann, who must be asleep, though the door to his bedroom is ajar. Tiptoeing around the room to the doorway, Newt hears the soft puffs of breath in the darkness. He has a random urge to sneak inside, to curl up next to Hermann close enough to slip back into those safe number-soaked dreams, and fleetingly Newt wonders if there's something creepy about listening to someone breathe. (Then again, he never was that great at relationships, all those unspoken rules.)

The pull is almost physical but Newt doesn't move, sits instead on the floor and leans against the doorframe. He knows he won't fall asleep again but he can't bear to lose that sound and the comfort it provides.

(Later, when the floor grows too cold and hard on his ass, he'll get up and raid Hermann's fridge. The only proper food he can find is the blandest leftover casserole Newt's ever eaten, and that's how Hermann finds him, grumbling that if Newt was going to ransack his kitchen he might as well have the decency to make some coffee.)

Turns out Hermann's apartment is a comfortable walking distance from TU Berlin, though he probably could've asked for a goddamn personal chauffeur and lo, he would have it. But even after effectively saving the world Hermann seems to have retained a sense of modesty unknown to Newt; the only concession he's made is cover up his arms and smooth down the worst of his hair for the visit.

There's the certain expected amount of awed looks and handshaking when they arrive, but Newt gets the feeling Hermann might have used some of his newfound influence to keep the worst of it at bay. It's a good call – even after the first good night's sleep in a while, Newt isn't feeling quite people-positive enough to be dragged in front of an audience.

This late into the semester, the only work Hermann has to take care of is a short conference, which Newt spends ensconced in Hermann's actually-kinda-nice office (Your admiration is overflowing as ever, Newton), and the few select PhD students he chooses to accept. For the latter part, Newt retreats to gaze out of the eastward office window, electing to ignore any possible looks the students might give him. The quiet burr of their conversation plays in the background as he looks for familiar landmarks, remembering a time when he used to think of Berlin as his city. Unconsciously, the landscape and the language seem to mix in his thoughts until from somewhere deep unbidden comes the call of home.

As if from a distance, he hears the door click shut, but he doesn't register the student leaving as much as the way Hermann's mind suddenly snaps into focus. Newt turns around to find
Hermann’s eyes steadily meeting his from across the room.

“Are you ready to talk now?” Hermann says, or might say – Newt isn’t entirely sure they’re talking aloud. He nods anyway, and they manage to leave the building without running into any more people.

They amble down the streets in a spontaneous river-bound pattern. It’s hard to put his experiences into words, even more so when he gets to the night of their phone call – there’s an alien quality to his memories, like trying to describe an out-of-body experience. The city facades appear smaller than he remembers in a way that makes Newt vaguely uncomfortable as he tries to match blurry childhood snapshots to their current surroundings.

“Has it changed?” he finally asks, when they’re nearing the Oberbaum bridge. “From ten years ago?”

Hermann tips his head and walks on in silence for a moment. “Not significantly,” he then replies. “Hardly surprising, though, considering the distance.”

“Yeah...” Newt breathes out, then: “I don’t know what I was thinking, going back to the States. Like, how can I live in a place that’s the same as ever when I’m not.”

They reach the river and slow down. Newt leans against the railings of the bridge and stares down into the water below. A brisk wind blows over the Spree and it eases something inside Newt, but it can hardly be mistaken for an ocean breeze. He glances at Hermann. “How can you stand it?” he asks.

Hermann shrugs. “I find it helps,” he says, and the answer startles a laugh out of Newt before he realizes Hermann’s being serious.

“You’re not lying,” he says, hating the shakiness in his voice. “Why? How can you—” Newt breaks off, turns back to the river so he doesn’t have to look at the frown spreading on Hermann’s face.

Newt takes a deep breath before speaking again. “Sometimes... For a while anyway, I thought about Hong Kong, about just staying there. Staying closer to the ocean, to where...” He can’t finish that thought; already there’s a tremble starting up his spine that scares the shit out of him.

Hermann is quiet for a long time. When he speaks, his voice is deliberately even. “It’s not you calling back to the Pacific, Newton,” he says.

“I don’t know what the fuck is,” Newt spits out. He looks at Hermann, sees his mouth open about to say something, and he leans in before those words can get out. “No, no, fuck you, it’s not fair! Why the fuck do you get to be fine after this?”

He turns away before anything more can be said and storms off. There are people staring, Hermann calling his name but Newt doesn’t stop, for the first time in ten years he doesn’t stop to wait, just walks away like everyone else always does and – shit. By the time it hits him he’s too far gone, and turns out he can feel worse than he already did.

Hermann wasn’t really expecting to find Newton back at the apartment but some part of him still feels a pang of disappointment at the silent rooms. He gives up on trying reach Newton by phone after the fifth failed attempt and slumps onto the couch, waiting for a call, a message. Waiting for
anything. There is work to do, whispering to him from its files and crates, but Hermann might as well try to conjure gold from thin air. Around sundown his stomach reminds him they never got around to having lunch, and he gets up to rummage around the kitchen, eating mechanically and without really tasting the food.

The evening news come and go, with no sign of Newton, and Hermann has to force himself to retire for the night. The best he can manage is an uneasy doze, interrupted every so often by a twinge from his leg. He considers getting a painkiller, even though it means he'll be out cold in case Newt comes around when –

all around you the vermin swarming the street still there still alive in their soft little meatbodies so easy to crack open rip apart crush into a red stain do it DO IT

– the roar of blood in his ears covers the sound of his breathing and Hermann wants to scream from the agony. The floor is a distant blur when he gets up to search for his clothes, his hand nearly missing his cane, but he pushes himself through the pain, propelled only by the thought of please for the love of God and please don't for Newton.

He just about remembers to pull on a coat before stumbling out of the door, one hand pressing a handkerchief to his nose, the other gripping his cane for dear life, and without even thinking about it, his steps take him East.

It doesn't take long for the fabric to bleed through, and only a few blocks from there it becomes obvious that his leg is not going to hold up. A quick search through his pockets is enough to inform Hermann that his phone is still on his bedside table, and he has to spend a moment hunched over his cane, biting his tongue to prevent himself from shouting profanities loud enough for the entire street to hear.

He can't turn around, he's too far away and he has to find... A quiet thrum from a short distance, and looking up Hermann sees a couple getting out of a taxi.

“Wh... Wait!” he yells, the loudness of his voice surprising even to his own ears. Hermann limps over as fast as he can, too overwrought to feel self-conscious about what a spectacle he must make, and taps on the taxi window.

“I need a ride,” he says as soon as he's inside, ignoring the widening of the driver's eyes. The man nods, visibly pulling himself together.

“No, no hospital.”

“Are you sure, you're–?”

“Yes, I'm sure! Look, I need to find a friend, it's an emergency. Go to...” And he has to close his eyes for a moment, concentrate on where Newton would... “Take me over the river. To Friedrichschain.”

His outburst seems to have discouraged the driver from trying to persuade Hermann to change his mind, and they pull out from the stop.

The drive passes as if in a bubble; the view outside doesn't feel quite real, or at the least not as real as the insistent discordant buzz in Hermann's ears and the flashes like underexposed snapshots in his mind. It's becoming less and less clear through whose eyes those images are coming by the time the taxi slows down near Warschauer Platz.
“Left here,” Hermann instructs. “A little further down.”

They finally draw to a stop near an alleyway that isn't seedy per se, but the car's harsh headlights don't exactly flatter the location. Hermann grasps his cane and takes a deep breath once he's up and out of the backseat.

“Now, I need you to wait here,” he tells the driver, who is clearly not delighted by the prospect of sitting idle in a dark alley waiting, to all intents and purposes, for a literally bleeding madman, but Hermann didn't get to his age and position by playing nice. He tightens his hold on the cane, lets his weight slump to the side just enough to be visible and says, “Please. I really need that ride back.”

The alley appears in overlays of blue, a feeling like a gentle magnetic pull inside Hermann guiding him in the right direction. He passes an opening, pauses, and from the corner of his eye catches a ghostly afterimage disappearing behind a corner. Retracing his steps takes him into a cul-de-sac and there, huddled in a corner next to a row of dumpsters, is Newton.

An overwhelming rush of relief fills Hermann and he calls out for Newton, but the feeling is short-lived when he sees the reaction. Newton raises his head at his name, true, but his eyes meeting Hermann's show no recognition. Slowly, he stands up from his crouch in an unfamiliarly smooth movement; Newton is anything but graceful. Even at his best he has a jittery kind of stillness to him, like a coiled spring waiting to unfurl. This Newton stands with a vacant, eerie calmness, more shell than man.

The sight makes Hermann break out in cold sweat. “Newton, can you hear me?” he asks. When there is no response of any kind, Hermann ventures a step closer. “Do you understand me, Newton? How did you get here?”

There is a long tense pause, after which Newton finally turns his unseeing eyes aside, the left one more ruined than Hermann's ever seen. “I-I wanted... I want to go home,” he says in a quiet, hollow voice.

Hermann swallows down. “It's all right, Newton,” he says, taking another step forward, and reaches out a hand. “If you just come with–” And then it hits him like a physical punch; home – home

*home is heaving birth pools of caustic ammonia clawing bursting through the natal sac to triumph over your unborn sister-brothers – no no Newton that is not you, you never had – siblings sister brothers always better always more loved by Father always – the memory escapes before Hermann can try to grasp it – Vater – and then he hears – Vati humming singing Sympathy For The Devil under his breath and Mutti laughs, says 'sei bitte leiser' on instinct – there you are, come on Newton...*

Hermann is distantly aware that the ground is cold and slightly damp beneath his knees, that there is fresh blood dripping from his nose, and then Newton's hand shoots out to grip his shoulder like a vise. Hermann lets out a huff of pain before he can stop it, but it's all right, because Newt's eyes are clear now, sharp green staring wide at Hermann. His mouth is moving but no sounds are coming out.

“Easy, easy,” Hermann whispers. “It's all right now.”

Newton seems to finally find his tongue after several ragged breaths. “Wh-where are we?” he asks, looking around the alleyway in obvious confusion.
“Not far from home,” Hermann replies. He folds out a relatively clean corner of his handkerchief and tries to wipe the worst of the blood off Newton's face. “Here, hold that. Come on.”

The car is still waiting when they limp out of the alley, both leaning equally heavily on each other. God bless the Berlin taxi service, Hermann thinks to himself and hears a quiet snort from Newton in return. The driver appears only to have been growing more concerned during Hermann's absence and jumps out of the car to open the door for them. After once more placating him that, no, really, they don't need a hospital, Hermann instructs the driver to take them back to Charlottenburg.

Newton stays blessedly silent during the exchange, opting instead to lean on Hermann's shoulder and bleed on his clothes. The unearthly drone is gone from his head, and instead he hears as if from a distance a voice much like Newt's singing just as every cop is a criminal and all the sinners saints and smiles like he's heard it a hundred times before.

It's pushing the line between late and early when they arrive at Hermann's apartment and painstakingly make their way up the two measly steps to the front door. Hermann dumps Newton unceremoniously on the couch to go make use of the medicine cabinet – the multitude of aches reverberating from him to Newton and back again are starting to form a feedback loop.

“Is your medical regime the same?” he asks, limping back to the living room with a small bottle in hand. “No SSRIs?”

“Nah, dude,” Newton says, shaking his head in reply and immediately regretting it. Hermann winces in sympathy and sits down heavily next to Newton. After a few tries he manages to open the bottle and hands Newton a small white pill.

“For the pain,” he says. “At the worst it'll make you slightly drowsy but at this hour I should think that an advantage.”

Newton nods and swallows the pill with ease. Absently, he rubs his upper lip, smearing the dried blood there. Hermann follows suit and relaxes into the couch, waiting for the ache in his leg to abate. Swallowing down, he realizes how dry his throat is, and no sooner has the thought crossed his mind that Newton gets up, shakily, and hobbles over to the kitchen.

“Can you still hear them?” Hermann asks, when Newton returns with two glasses of lukewarm water and a slightly cleaner face. Newton shrugs one shoulder.

“Kinda. It's like... there's a door in my mind. It's closed now, but I know it's still there. I know there's movement on the other side.”

He takes a small sip of water and sits somewhat awkwardly on the coffee table so that he's facing Hermann. His leg starts up in a nervous jitter. “You know, those things are so much hardier than us,” Newton says. “When the Breach collapsed... Up until the portal on our side closed, I could feel them. Caught in the ground zero and so angry at us, all their pain...” Newton's voice breaks a bit and he clears his throat before turning to Hermann. “Do you ever feel...?” he asks, trails off and then gestures at his head.

Hermann shakes his own head in reply. “No, not directly. I only hear them insofar as they filter through you, like interference.” He feels a pang of guilt not his own in reaction to his words, and Newton turns his head to the side. Hermann goes on, “Of course, it could just be a matter of frequency. You had more than double the... exposure than I did.”

Newton is nodding, but it feels to be more for show than agreement. He drums his fingers against the side of the glass. “The idea was...” he finally begins, then pauses to rethink his words. “I
mean, Drifting is supposed to be this neat surgical thing – connection, but the hive mind was like getting cleaved in the head with an axe. And it feels... like I'm still bleeding, my trauma bleeding into your brain, and you don't deserve it.”

“T've volunteered to help.”

“It was still my idea in the first place.”

“For God's sake, Newton,” Hermann snaps. He has to squeeze the bridge of his nose as his headache does not appreciate the outburst, and after a few deep breaths he turns back to Newton who's looking a bit wide-eyed.

“If you knew about the damage, if you were aware that the hive mind was still active, why did you run away from the only stable connection that could've helped you?” Hermann asks.

Newton scowls at him. “Way to make this sound like I was only thinking about myself–”

“You weren't?”

“Fuck – you, what if this shit infects you as well, then what?”

“It's going to 'infect' me anyway!” Hermann shouts, really too loud considering the hour and his neighbors. “Whether your mind goes insane halfway across the world or in the room next to me, I'm going to feel it just the same! Difference being, if you're on the other side of the Atlantic there isn't much I can do about it.”

Newton looked like he wanted to fight back, but his face turns stricken at Hermann's words and his eyes drop to his glass. There is a long silence during which the room wells in an ambience of guilt, fear and regret. Newton draws in a shuddering breath.

“I thought the distance would make it easier,” he finally says in a small voice.

Hermann heaves a sigh. He has never been a tactile person, but the least he can do is reach for Newton's arm. “Yet you never asked me for help, you just left.” He gives a reassuring squeeze. “Did you really think I'd turn you away?”

Newton looks down at their point of contact and makes a helpless kind of gesture with his other hand. “Well, how was I to know?” he asks, not quite succeeding in keeping the embarrassment out of his tone, but his lips are twitching nevertheless.

“I suppose this is the point where I'm meant to feel grateful that you didn't eavesdrop on my thoughts when you had the chance.” Hermann tries to make his exasperation heard but it's a difficult feat when his own face is eager to return Newton's smile.

“Hey, man, I've got... like, standards and... and stuff,” Newton mutters. His head is nodding as he speaks and his blinking is growing more sluggish by the second. The painkillers are truly kicking in, as evidenced when Hermann pushes himself up from the couch and doesn't feel the bone-deep twinge in his leg and hip.

“I'm just sayin',” Newton continues in a slurry babble, “if I'm Drift conn–compatible with an alien hive mind... and you, what the hell does that say about you?”

“I think it's time for rest,” Hermann says and helps Newton to his somewhat swaying feet.

Though his mouth soon runs out of power, Newton's brain is only speeding up. While Hermann belatedly goes to wash his face, Newt flops down onto the bed on what he intuitively perceives as
'his side'. So he and Hermann may have worked out some of the trust issues that have been clogging their communication, but they've only scratched the surface and some of the stuff looming up ahead is going to be scary as hell. Admitting you've got a problem is the first step, yeah, but how are you supposed to deal with the ghosts of inter-dimensional monsters living inside your head? (Hello, my name is Newton and I have bits of kaiju in my brain. Hello, Newton, says absolutely nobody.) How long can they keep this up? What about when he eventually has to go back to the States, when Hermann tires of him, when he next gets so angry he –

“You're on my side,” Hermann pulls him out of his downward spiral of thoughts, and Newt obligingly budges over so that Hermann can lie down on his back. After some bodily negotiation Newt is allowed to rest his head on Hermann's shoulder that should by all accounts be too bony to be comfortable. Maybe it's just the physical proximity, the weight and warmth of another person (the pilots obliquely spoke of a Drift hangover, Newt remembers) – their skin and scars of all forms, left by the war on the people, the cities, the very bottom of the ocean, scars perhaps only waiting to reopen...

Stop thinking.

Silence falls together with Hermann's hand in his hair. Newt releases his breath as he lets the tension drain from his body. His eyes close, and in his mind he sees the outline of a door, immeasurably vast, higher than his eye can see...

Hermann scratches gentle fingers down his scalp.

Actually, it's not that big of a door. Hardly immeasurable.

Kinda small, really.

Fingertips rub tiny circles into the nape of his neck, and Newt hears (or thinks he hears) a quiet sound

like a key turning

*click.*